

## Chapter 1

# STUDY BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

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*This chapter introduces Harriet Tubman, describes reasons for this study, explains the process by which it was conducted, identifies the study area, and summarizes the involvement of the public in the study. It describes the process through which the study was conducted including the criteria for measuring resources for potential addition to the national park system.*

## Background

Harriet Tubman is revered by many as a national and international hero – a freedom seeker and leader of the Underground Railroad. Her life story has been told many times, until recently mainly in children’s literature and oral history. She was born enslaved in Dorchester County, Maryland. She emancipated herself by fleeing but returned time and again to Maryland to escort family members and friends north out of slavery.

Although Harriet Tubman is, in the minds of many, synonymous with the Underground Railroad, that single equivalency is not an accurate description of her many contributions. Tubman’s life of leadership and service represented much more than her role in the Underground Railroad. In the Civil War she was a nurse, a scout, and a spy. Following the war and continuing into her old age, she advocated and raised funds for women’s rights and founded one of the first homes for the aged at her home in Auburn, New York.

Although Harriet Tubman is known widely, there has been no previous national study to identify the places where she lived and worked. No federal commemorative site has been established in her honor, despite the depth of her contributions and her stature nationally and internationally.

## Purpose and Need for this Study

In 2000 Congress directed the Secretary of the Interior to evaluate the potential to establish a national park area or a national heritage area that would commemorate one of the world's best known heroes of emancipation. The Harriet Tubman Special Resource Study Act (P.L. 106-516, signed November 13, 2000, see Appendix) directs the Secretary to evaluate seven Tubman-associated sites in Auburn, New York, and Dorchester County, Maryland, plus other relevant areas that the study might reveal. The bill was introduced in the House of Representatives by now retired New York Congressman Amo Houghton; a companion bill was introduced in the U.S. Senate by Senator Charles Schumer (NY) and now retired Senator Paul Sarbanes (MD).

In 1996, the National Park Service in its Special Resource Study of the Underground Railroad recommended that specific sites be evaluated further to determine their appropriateness for inclusion in the national park system.<sup>1</sup> Two (of the 13) sites are associated with Harriet Tubman – the Home for the Aged in Auburn, New York, and the Brodess Farm in Dorchester County, Maryland. The recommendation said these are “considered to be high potential candidates for interpretation of the Underground Railroad story and could also have some association with the national park system.”<sup>2</sup> The congressional action of 2000 authorizing this study follows that recommendation.

This study report summarizes a long process of research, outreach, and evaluation by a professional study team assembled for this purpose. It is written to provide the Secretary of the Interior and Congress with information on the sites and resources associated with Harriet Tubman, and contains alternatives for the management, administration, and protection of those sites and resources, as well as evaluation of their appropriateness for becoming a unit of the national park system. Cost estimates for land protection, development, maintenance, and operation are also included. The report includes an Environmental Assessment required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to assess the effects of potential federal government action on the human environment.

The study investigated dozens of Tubman-related resources, ascertained the public's level of interest in recognizing Harriet Tubman nationally, and evaluated whether one or more of the resources would be appropriate for designation as a national park system unit. This report is available for public review for a period of 30 days. During the review period, the National Park Service is accepting comments from

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<sup>1</sup> Underground Railroad Special Resource Study, Management Concepts/Environmental Assessment, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Denver Service Center, September 1995.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

interested parties electronically, at public meetings, and by mail. At the end of the public comment period, the National Park Service will review all comments and determine whether any changes should be made to the report. Following the public comment period for the report, a public response document will be prepared and NPS will determine if a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) is warranted. If a FONSI is approved, the report will then be prepared for transmittal to the Secretary of the Interior who, in turn, will transmit it to Congress.

## Areas of Study

Starting with the seven sites named in the law, the study team expanded its investigation well beyond the Dorchester, Maryland, and Auburn, New York, sites before concluding that the Eastern Shore of Maryland and Auburn, New York are the most appropriate places to understand and recognize the contributions of Harriet Tubman to United States history.

### CHOPTANK RIVER AREA

The Dorchester County, Maryland, sites named in the study legislation are Brodess Farm and Bazel Church.



Figure 1-1. Brodess Farm, Greenbriar Road, Bucktown, Dorchester County, Maryland



Figure 1-2. Bazel Church, Bestpitch Ferry Road, Bucktown, Dorchester County, Maryland

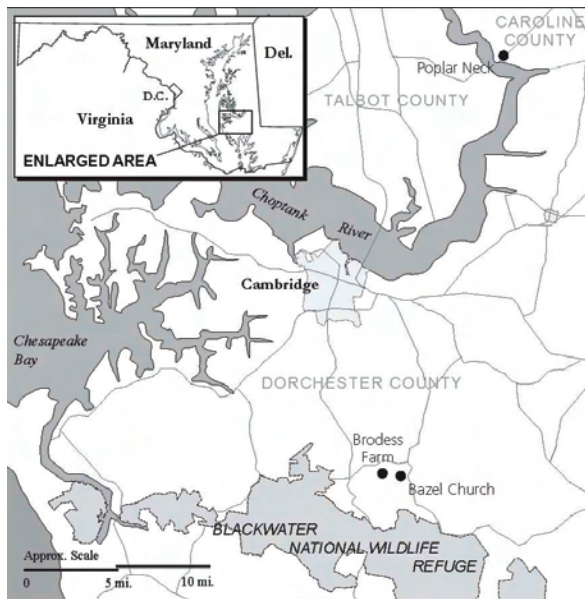


Figure 1-3. Choptank River Region, Maryland Eastern Shore

## AUBURN, NEW YORK

Sites in Auburn, New York, named in the study legislation are: the Tubman Home for the Aged, the Tubman residence, the Thompson Memorial AME Zion Church, the Tubman gravesite, and Seward House, the home of President Lincoln's Secretary of State, William H. Seward.



Figure 1-4. Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged, Auburn, New York



Figure 1-5. Thompson Memorial AME Zion Church, Auburn, New York

Figure 1-6. Harriet Tubman Residence, Auburn, New York





Figure 1-7. Tubman gravestone,  
Fort Hill Cemetery, Auburn, New York



Figure 1-8. Seward House, Auburn, New York



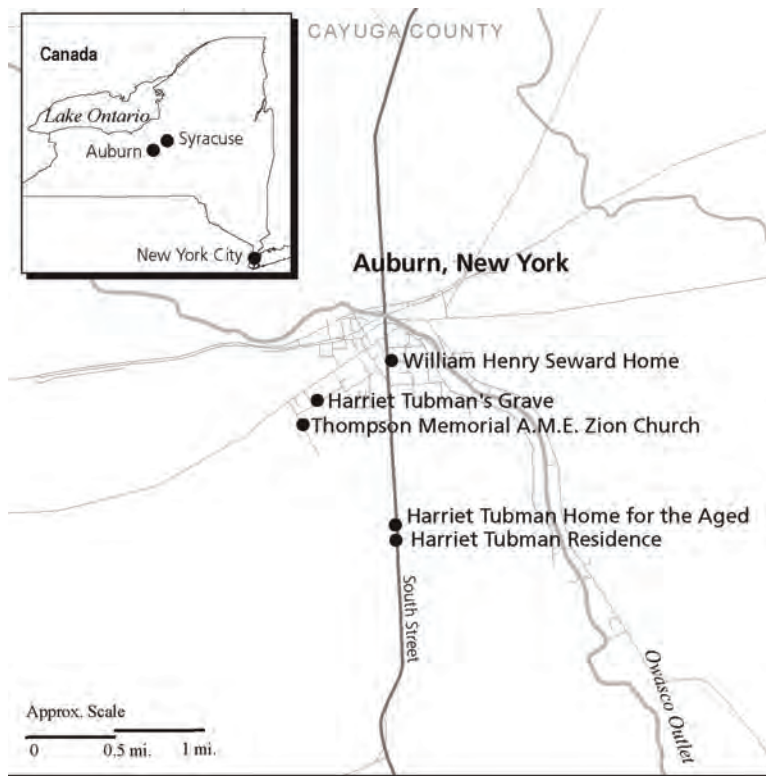


Figure 1-9. Auburn, New York

The major areas of focus are the lands of Tubman's birth, youth, and young adult life – the Choptank River region of Maryland; and her home for more than 40 years – Auburn, New York. The Choptank region contains extensive and evocative landscapes that have experienced relatively minor changes since the mid 19th century. It is a wet landscape comprised of streams, swamps, and forests mixed with expanses of open water next to large patches of productive agricultural land. The landscapes offer visitors a compelling setting for understanding the narrative of Tubman's formative years and her break away from enslavement. Sites in the Choptank region known to be associated with Tubman are found in Dorchester County, within and adjacent to the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, which has been under federal protection since 1933. In Caroline County, north of Dorchester, is the outstandingly scenic site at Poplar Neck, containing a house with historic fabric from the period of Tubman's parents' employment there, and nearby properties that were associated with her parents and Quaker friends in the Underground Railroad network.

In Auburn, a National Historic Landmark originally designated in 1974 was expanded in 2000 to include the Home for the Aged and Tubman Residence located on a 32-acre parcel at the southern boundary of the city, and Thompson Memorial AME Zion Church located approximately one mile from the Home. A barn and the foundation of the John Brown Hall, an important building used by Tubman, are also located on the Home property, which includes modern structures for administration and visitors. The residence and the church have been undergoing historic preservation and rehabilitation. Adjacent to the church is a former rectory, no longer in use, on the half-acre parcel property on Parker Street, adjacent to the Fort Hill Cemetery, where Tubman is buried. Her gravesite has been a pilgrimage destination for many years.

## Study Process

During the period of this study, knowledge of Tubman's history has increased enormously through five new biographies drawing on extensive original documents and records.<sup>3</sup> These publications have stirred new interest in Tubman and produced a wealth of details about her life. This report draws heavily on this new scholarship.

The study has been conducted by an interdisciplinary team including NPS planners, historians, and cultural resource specialists in the Northeast Region, joined by NPS staff from the Southeast, Midwest, and National Capital Regions. The team has extensive experience in public consultation, especially in communities of African Americans. The team has drawn on expertise of many in African American history, ethnography, archeology, historical architecture, and cultural landscapes. The NPS National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program has been represented by the national program manager and three regional program managers.

The team collected information on more than 100 sites thought to be associated with Harriet Tubman throughout the eastern United States and Canada. By site visits and other research methods, team members attempted to verify the connections, as well as to clarify the current status of the sites. This investigation ultimately led back to the two primary areas where Tubman is most closely associated.

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<sup>3</sup> *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero*, Kate Clifford Larson, New York: Ballantine Books, 2004; *Harriet Tubman: The Life and Life Stories*, Jean M. Humez, Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003; *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom*, Catherine Clinton, New York: Little Brown & Co., 2004; *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History*, Milton C. Sernett, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2007; *Harriet Tubman: Imagining a Life*, Beverly Lowry, New York: Doubleday, 2007.



After sifting through views from the public and research on Tubman's life and sites, the team focused on options for commemorating Tubman, applying the congressionally prescribed National Park Service Criteria for Parklands. Accordingly, areas that may be recommended for designation as units of the national park system must:

- Possess nationally significant natural, cultural, or recreational resources;
- Be suitable and feasible additions to the national park system; and,
- Require direct NPS management instead of protection by other public agencies or the private sector.

The team also explored the potential for a national heritage area designation, finding that an extensive multi-state based heritage area was neither feasible nor an adequate expression of this woman who made her mark in disparate places. Looking at all of the sites that had verified connection to Tubman, the team focused on Auburn, New York, and the Choptank River Region of Maryland.

In Auburn, the Home for the Aged, the Tubman Residence, and Thompson AME Zion Church are historic sites of long standing and are National Historic Landmarks. The team has consulted extensively with the AME Zion Church, owner of the properties, throughout the study in an effort to reach a common vision on the future for the historic Tubman structures and farm. The AME Zion Church has provided stewardship of the property for more than 100 years.

In the Choptank River region, landscape rather than structures reflects Tubman's life and work. This landscape has been evaluated using National Historic Landmark criteria resulting in a determination of its national significance.<sup>4</sup> The team worked with the State of Maryland, the counties of Dorchester, Caroline, and Talbot, the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, and many others to map and evaluate the relevant areas. The State of Maryland has recently designated a site in this area to commemorate Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad.

## **Public Involvement**

Initial formal public scoping meetings took place between spring 2002 and spring 2004, following a Federal Register Notice. The study team held meetings at sites along the eastern seaboard from South Carolina to Canada co-sponsored by local organizations. This period was followed by ongoing public scoping with stakeholders, agency officials, and the interested public. From June through September 2008 the team held a series

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<sup>4</sup> Appendix 3.

of stakeholder and public meetings on the preliminary alternative concepts in Auburn, New York, and in the three Maryland counties.

During the study, the team made contact with organizations and individuals who admire and seek additional information about Tubman or advocate for her broader recognition. These organizations and individuals maintain her legacy and are eager to be connected with others with similar interests.

Throughout the study, representatives from the AME Zion Church and the Tubman Home in Auburn and key state and local agencies in Maryland and New York participated in the process. All expressed keen interest in working with the NPS to advance the commemoration of Harriet Tubman, ideally at nationally designated sites.

The team consulted with the Mayor of Auburn, New York, county commissioners of Dorchester and Caroline counties, representatives of Talbot County and representatives of Bazel Church. The governors of Maryland and New York will be invited to comment on the study. Close coordination has occurred with involved state agency representatives of both states throughout the course of the study.

Tubman is not only a documented historic figure, but she was also a legend long before her death, indicated by the popular name “Moses,” applied in her lifetime and still used today. Keepers of the Tubman legend reside throughout the country and abroad, so in this study it was essential to reach out and to consult a geographically dispersed congregation of publics and to understand how the legend has contributed to American culture. The team set up a study website <http://www.HarrietTubmanStudy.org> giving an overview of the study, announcing public meetings, and inviting comments.



Figure 1-10. Scoping for the study began in Auburn, New York, in 2002.

Team members participated in conferences and seminars at which the NPS Tubman study was discussed and an exhibit displayed. They distributed 30,000 copies of the study brochure at conferences, meetings, and individually through the Network to Freedom Underground Railroad program. To tap the expertise of community activists, scholars, and others, they held a workshop in Washington, D.C., to elicit the key themes of Tubman's life. The team summarized the salient points raised in public scoping this way:

- Tubman was under-recognized by the government and deserved official national attention.
- There needed to be a place or places connected with Tubman where people could visit to see and experience a connection with her life.
- The multiple groups and individuals who were carrying the Tubman torch for years wanted to join with others to further her recognition and research on her life and contributions.

The study process of research coupled with public participation has led to the study team's conclusion that resources related to the life and contributions of Harriet Tubman meet the criteria for inclusion into the national park system. As required by the National Environmental Policy Act and NPS Management Policies 2006, a series of alternatives are included in this report for public review and comment.

### **Other Tubman Initiatives**

Many activities and initiatives have been undertaken during the period of this study. Wherever appropriate, the team sought to make connections which may lead to future beneficial collaborations in honoring and learning from Harriet Tubman. Following is a preliminary list.

- The national African American Museum Commission began developing a future museum of the Smithsonian to be built in the next decade on the National Mall in Washington, DC.
- The State of Maryland has established the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park near Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge in Dorchester County.
- Dorchester and Caroline counties, Maryland, created the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Byway driving tour of two counties with plans to link it with other states.

- Two websites devoted to Tubman scholarship have been launched by scholars.<sup>5</sup>
- Commemorative events, especially around March 10, the anniversary of Tubman's death, have been increasing in number and extent.
- Sites and programs related to Tubman are continually being added to the NPS Network to Freedom Underground Railroad program.
- New exhibits have been developed for the Tubman Museum in Cambridge and the county museum in Denton, Maryland.
- In an effort to recognize the natural world of Tubman, the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge has developed a Tubman trail to allow visitors to move deep into the terrain that Tubman would have known.
- The New York State Heritage Program is assisting the Harriet Tubman Home in Auburn to develop an interpretive program.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.HarrietTubmanJournal.org> by Jim McGowan, and <http://www.HarrietTubmanBiography.com> by Kate Clifford Larson.